

2021

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Recommended Citation

Shalbafian, Ali Asghar and Zarandian, Neda (2021) "A New Look at the Arba'een Mega-event from the Perspective of Iraqis as the Host Community," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 9: Iss. 5, Article 8.

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol9/iss5/8>

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A New Look at the Arba'een Mega-event from the Perspective of Iraqis as the Host Community

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The present study explores the impacts of the Arba'een event from the perspective of the inhabitants in the host community, Iraq, as the key stakeholders. Arba'een procession is one of the forms of pilgrimage that has expanded significantly in recent years and has a special place among Muslims. Due to the huge number of pilgrims, this phenomenon can be considered as a mega-event with different effects. One of the best judges of these effects is the host community. To evaluate the judgements, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 Iraqis selected via convenience snowball sampling. The data collected from the interview transcripts were analysed using the content analysis method and MAXQDA10 software. The results indicated that the event has had economic, environmental, socio-cultural and political impacts on the host country as well as certain effects on pilgrims, each subcategorised into a set of subthemes. Based on the identified effects, some suggestions are made as guidelines for policymakers and planners of the Arba'een procession to better organise this mega-event.

Key Words: Arba'een, host community, pilgrimage, tourism, impacts

Introduction

Pilgrimage and spiritual motivations are among the main drivers for travelling, which is a very popular activity in the modern world (Sharply, 2016; Ya-Ping Changa *et al.*, 2020). Pilgrimage means the search for a sacred and blessed thing, and shrines are the representatives of this sanctity (Sharahi & Zolfagharzadeh, 2019). It is a kind of religious ritual that can be performed collectively or individually. A pilgrim attends a holy place consciously, lovingly and mystically to express his or her love, devotion and loyalty (Gholipour *et al.*, 2015; Javadi Amoli, 2015). Some have even gone so far as to say that pilgrimage is on a spectrum that includes activities based on pure spirituality at one end and pure secularity at the other (Badone & Roseman, 2004).

Therefore, pilgrimage can take different forms. One of them is a procession on a route in the form of a collective walk. In fact, this form of pilgrimage is a cultural phenomenon that has emerged with religious incentives and is accommodated by the beneficiaries of the holy place (Inge Vistad). Some of the routes for such a kind of pilgrimage are Saint Olav's Ways in Norway, Santiago de Compostella in Spain, Shingon Buddhism on Shikouko

in Japan, Croagh Patrick Mountain in Ireland, and Nakahechi Kumano in Wakayama, Japan (Inge Vistad *et al.*, 2021; Mujtaba Husein, 2018; Kato, 2017). There have been extensive studies of foot-pilgrimage, but most of them have examined pilgrimage paths in Western countries (Mujtaba Husein, 2018) and ignored such paths in Islam. It is important therefore to note that pilgrimage is generally an important issue in Islam, and, secondly, walking pilgrimages are prominent and are considered especially valuable in this religion.

Pilgrimage in Islam is also seen as an intense training course in achieving human perfection, and its necessity has always been emphasised by religious leaders (Tayeb, 2002). One of the significant examples of foot-pilgrimage in the Islamic world occurs in the Middle East and focuses on the sacred city of Karbala in Iraq, on the occasion of Arba'een. To some Muslims, the city is known as the second Ka'aba or the Ka'aba of hearts¹. It owes its importance to the tomb of Imam Hussain (Faris, 2002).

1 The Ka'aba is the most sacred shrine of Islam. It stands in a corner of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, and is the point to which all Muslims turn when they pray.

On the Day of Arba'een, an enormous number of pilgrims start a procession from Kufa or Basra, two cities in Iraq, to the shrine of Imam Hussein (AS) in Karbala. It is a journey whose very path is sacred (Bod, 2016). In recent years, the Arba'een gathering has been identified as the largest religious event in the world (Luz, 2020), and it is referred to as a mega-event (Bod, 2016, 2019) or a huge social movement (Ghafari Hashjin & Aghaei, 2018). In 2018 it is estimated that more than 25 million people attended this ritual (Hassan & Jurn, 2020). Pilgrims going to Karbala are not limited to the followers of Islam and do not belong to a particular country or race; the event of Arba'een actually gives support to the claim that the boundaries of spirituality have been crossed (Shalbfafian & Zarandian, 2019).

Certainly, this huge number of travellers and the global scope of this event can have many outcomes and there are many different aspects to the impacts. The effects of this magnificent event can be identified by consulting key stakeholders and many of them are the Iraqi people who host and accommodate the Arba'een guests (Sharahi & Zolfagharzadeh, 2019). In this regard, the present study aims to identify the impacts of Arba'een from the perspective of the people hosting this event.

Arba'een: A Pilgrimage to the Altar of Love

Pilgrimage on foot has been a common practice in different places and religions. Prophet Adam (PBUH) walked to the house of God thousands of times. The Roman emperor made a covenant with God to visit Jerusalem from his Constantinople headquarters in gratitude for a victory in war (Homayoun & Bod, 2015). Nowadays, many walk the 850-kilometer route to the shrine of Santiago de Compostela in Spain to practice their pilgrimage rituals. It takes months to reach the Shingon Shrine in Japan, and a day's pilgrimage to the top of St. Patrick's mountain Ireland (Gholipour *et al.*, 2015). However, in recent years, the Arba'een walk has been an unparalleled example of a pilgrimage walk in terms of the number and variety of participants. This is owing to its special place for Muslims.

The significance of this walk, firstly, originates from the special status of Imam Hussein (pbuh) and his shrine for Muslims. Secondly, it is based on the emphasis that the great figures in the history of Islam have placed on it. Imam Hussein (pbuh) is the third Shiite Imam who was martyred between two streams of water along with his

family members. Even his infant and companions were martyred in the battle against the tyranny of Yazid, who had usurped the Islamic caliphate. This happened in Karbala on Ashura. Ashura is the tenth day of the first lunar month, Muharram, and thus, Arba'een is 40 days after Ashura (Hassan & Jurn, 2020). On the first Arba'een after Hussein's martyrdom, Jabir ibn Abdullah Ansari, a great companion of the Prophet (pbuh), visited his grave in Karbala. He was there until Imam Hussein's family members, who had remained alive but were captivated, returned from the Levant to visit his grave (Arabi, 2019). This pilgrimage marks the beginning of the Arba'een walk throughout history.

The heads of early Islam emphasised the importance of holding the Arba'een ceremony. For instance, Imam Hassan Askari (pbuh), the eleventh Imam of the Shiites, postulated five signs for a true believer, one of which was to participate in the Arba'een walk (Ebnetavous, 2004). Also, Imam Sadeq (pbuh), the sixth Imam of Shiites, promised great rewards for this pilgrimage (Ebgholieh Ghomi, 1998). For this reason, going on a pilgrimage to Karbala on foot has been a common practice, especially among Iraqis, for many years. The Arba'een walk was banned during the years of the former regime in Iraq, but people did it despite the difficulties and dangers, and many were martyred on the way. After the fall of the regime in 2003, the ceremony was revived and, within a few years, became a common practice again by Muslims from different countries. Arba'een has, thus, turned into an occasion for the largest annual human gathering in the world (Sharahi & Zolfagharzadeh, 2019).

Review of Literature on Arba'een

Given the growing number of Arba'een pilgrims, studies on this event have also increased. On investigation, these studies can be divided into four main groups.

First, some studies just describe the event. For example, Bod (2019) referred to the dimensions of the Arba'een walk and termed it as a mega-event as well as a form of religious tourism. Hassan and Jurn (2020) considered it to be like a university and tried to introduce it as a world movement.

Second, are studies which have focused on the pilgrims as the main components of the Arba'een walk. Taj Bakhsh *et al.* (2019) addressed the identity of the pilgrims and defined three criteria for examining them, including:

- a) national identity (language, clothing, land, race, values, and food preferences),
- b) Arba'een identity (clothing, rituals, alliance with Hossein, values, and symbols) and
- c) Shiite identity (hijab, values, and symbols).

Furthermore, Imani Koshkho and Bod (2016) identified the motives of pilgrims including inner feelings and religious beliefs. According to these authors, spirituality and liberation from worldly belongings are the most important motives of pilgrims. Nikjoo and Sharifi Tehrani (2020) sought to understand the pilgrims' mental image of Imam Hussein (pbuh).

As the third type, some studies have gone beyond this and paid special attention to the perceptions and experiences of pilgrims. For instance, Razavizadeh (2017) addressed issues such as the suspension of material experience, sacred suffering, and emotional motivation for collective rituals during Arba'een. Dorodian (2018) focused on the spiritual perception of the pilgrims and enumerated its components, including identification, sense of security amidst insecurity, honest hospitality, the experience of voluntary love, and the mutual love of the host and the guest. Sharahi and Zolfagharzadeh (2019) looked at the issue from another point of view and analysed the pilgrims' perception of the host. However, Bod (2016) took a step beyond individual perspectives and explored the pilgrim's experience from cultural-religious, socio-economic, and political-national perspectives.

Instead of focusing on pilgrims, the fourth group of studies sheds light on the socio-political effects of the Arba'een walk. Ghafari Hashjin and Aghaei (2018) refer to the Arba'een ceremony and marked it with three features, including social movement, continuity of headquarters and use of a wide range of public demonstrations and public tools. Arabi (2019) highlighted the social functions of the Arba'een walk such as showing the authority of the Islamic world, conveying the messages of Ashura to the world, enabling Muslims to meet face to face, increasing synergy in various fields, and reducing disputes and conflicts. Furthermore, Mousavi and Bayat (2018) pointed to other social functions of the event including seeking identity, shaping the Islamic way of life, reforming society and paving the way for the reappearance of Imam Mahdi, solving social and individual problems and sufferings, and establishing a new social order. There were also

some political functions identified, including resistance to and hatred for oppression and arrogance, Islamic unity and enlightenment, and creation of security. However, a few other scholars such as Parivash (2019) and Ahmadi (2018) have noted the impact of the Arba'een walk on convergence and unity among Muslims and the creation of an Islamic civilisation.

Research Methodology

The present study is exploratory in terms of its objectives and the fundamental approach is to focus on the views of the host audience by using methods that are qualitative in terms of data collection.

Sampling

The research population included Iraqi people who participated in reception of the Arba'een pilgrims, in particular, the participants were those who served the pilgrims during the Arba'een walk in the Moukebs, i.e., free resting places for pilgrims along the route and in the destination. To identify these people, help was sought from an Iraqi citizen who was experienced in the pilgrimage and fluent in Arabic. He started with a limited number of people and then identified more people using snowball sampling to achieve the final sample. It was planned that the selection of more people would continue so as to reach data saturation. Finally, 22 Iraqis were purposefully selected for interview. They were from 18 to 55 years of age, and 13 of them were men. In terms of education, the interviewees ranged from diploma holders to those with master's degrees.

Data collection

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. The researcher started the interview with general discussions about Arba'een and then focused on the major initial questions. The eight main questions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Main Interview Questions about the Impacts of Arba'een

1. In your opinion, what socio-cultural effects does the Arba'een walk have on the Iraqi people?
2. In your opinion, what economic chances does the Arba'een walk bring to Iraq and its people?
3. In your opinion, what are the environmental impacts of the Arba'een walk on Iraq?
4. In your opinion, what are the political impacts of the Arba'een march on Iraq?
5. What has been the impact of the Arba'een walk on relations between Iran and Iraq?
6. What are the achievements of the Arba'een walk for the Islamic community (Muslims)?
7. What are the achievements of the Arba'een for the international community?
8. What are the effects of the Arba'een walk on the pilgrims?

Data analysis

The collected data were analysed thematically using Maxqda10 software. Generally, content analysis is a method of analysing textual results so as to transform scattered and diverse findings into a rich, detailed and integrated bulk of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). On this basis, the data collected from the interviews were categorised into the following themes:

- Primary themes: The manuscripts of the interviews were carefully reviewed by the researchers. Key codes and themes were identified in association with the effects of the Arba'een walk.
- Organising themes: The themes obtained from the summary of the primary themes were categorised.
- The core theme: This theme was formed through the combining of the organising themes.

Data qualification

To ensure the robustness of the data, their dependability, transferability, credibility and confirmability were assessed. These four criteria, set by Lincoln and Guba (1985), were checked as follows:

a) Dependability: To ensure the dependability of the data, the coding outputs and categories were reviewed and confirmed by experts in the subject. In addition, the researchers spent considerable time coming to an in-depth understanding of the subject and explored the research problem from a multidimensional perspective.

b) Transferability: To ensure the transferability of the findings, detailed information about the research setting and the interviewees was recorded to be accessed by readers.

c) Credibility: All the files used in the coding process as well as the notes taken at various stages were recorded and kept for further review.

d) Confirmability: The findings were reviewed and confirmed by several experts in the field.

Results and Discussion

After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and coded. Given that the main focus was to identify the impacts of Arba'een from the perspective of the host community, the core theme was the impacts of Arba'een walk. Once the core theme was set, five organising themes were identified: economic impacts, environmental impacts, socio-cultural impacts, political impacts, and impacts on pilgrims. Each organising theme was subcategorised into a number of subthemes.

Economic Impacts

The organising theme of the economic impacts was subclassified into: the positive impact of the Arba'een walk on economic businesses; the Iraqi market; the failure to use the economic capacity, and; the blessing of Imam Hussein (pbuh) (Table 2). According to some of the participants, the arrival of Arba'een pilgrims in Iraq

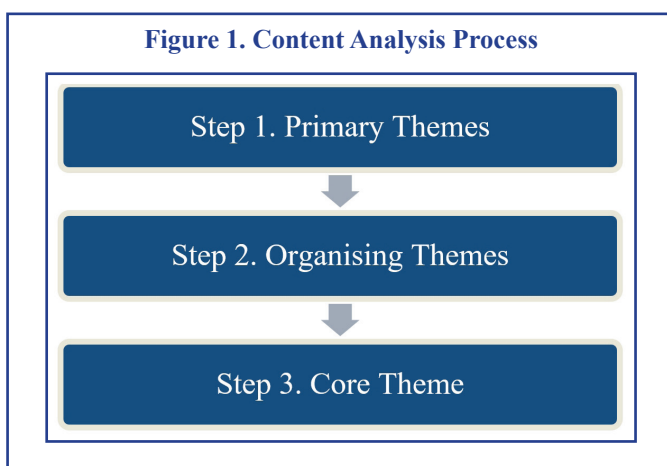
Figure 1. Content Analysis Process

Table 2: The Organising Theme and Sub-themes for Economic Impacts

Core Theme	Organising Theme	Subthemes
The Impacts of the Arba'een walk	Economic Impacts	Positive effects on tourism businesses
		Positive effects on the Iraqi market
		Failure to exploit the economic capacity
		Paying attention to spiritual aspects instead of economic effects
		Long-term blessings from Imam Hussein (pbuh)

is accompanied by the development of businesses such as hotels in Iraq. Some of the other interviewed Iraqis also believe that the arrival of pilgrims particularly boosts the Iraqi market. By buying gifts and souvenirs, travellers can have a positive economic impact on the markets in Iraqi cities. However, according to some interviews, due to the free hospitality during the Arba'een period, such as food, place to stay, and procession and camp— services, the amount of income earned from the huge number of passengers entering the country is very small. One of the participants emphasised this issue as follows:

The Iraqi people host a large number of pilgrims during the Arba'een ceremony. As they are often accommodated in the processions, it does not have positive economic effects. Also, because most pilgrims do not use the transportation system, they inject limited revenue into the Iraqi economy (Participant 4).

However, some of the interviewees emphasised the focus of the hosts on spiritual aspects and the rewards of the Hereafter and their lack of concern about financial and economic consequences of this mega-event:

This event does not have much economic impact on Iraq, and the Iraqi people receive pilgrims for the reward of the Hereafter (Participant 7).

The blessing of Imam Hussein (pbuh) was another theme pointed out by the Iraqi people as an outcome of the Arba'een event. This means that a person's free service to pilgrims during the Arba'een walk can significantly increase his or her economic income during the year with the grace of Imam Hussein:

The charity work we do during the Arba'een period brings many blessings and economic boons to our lives (Participant 18).

Environmental Impacts

The Organising Theme of environmental impacts (Table 3) was subcategorised into the subthemes of negative environmental impacts, lack of attention to tolerable capacity, the participation of pilgrims in cleaning, the participation of the Iraqi people in cleaning the environment, and the government's role in controlling the environmental impacts. According to most of the participants, Arba'een pilgrimage is associated with negative environmental impacts due to the high number of pilgrims. The main factor that creates this problem is the lack of attention to tolerable capacity:

The Arba'een event has negative impacts on the environment. Measures must be taken to accommodate a huge number of pilgrims in a limited area (Participant 2).

Table 3: The Organising Theme and Subthemes for Environmental Impacts

Core Theme	Organising Theme	Subthemes
The Impacts of the Arba'een walk	Environmental impacts	Negative environmental impacts
		Negligence of the tolerable capacity
		Stakeholders' participation in environmental clean-up
		People's participation in environmental clean-up
		The government's role in controlling the environmental impacts

Table 4: The Organising Theme and Subthemes for Socio-cultural Impacts

Core Theme	Organising Theme	Subthemes
The Impacts of the Arba'een walk	Socio-cultural Impacts	Cultural exchange
		Creating unity among different religions and nationalities
		Strengthening the cultural norms of the Iraqi people
		Strengthening the beliefs of the Iraqi people
		Strengthening the beliefs of Muslims

According to the participants, the cooperation of the pilgrims, the local community and the Iraqi government can minimise the negative impacts of this mega-event on the environment.

Socio-Cultural Impacts

The socio-cultural impacts of the Arba'een walk (Table 4) include cultural exchanges, the unification of different religions and nationalities, supporting Iraqi native culture, the enhancement of the Iraqi people's faith, and the strengthening of Muslim beliefs. Cultural exchanges are among the significant socio-cultural effects of the Arba'een pilgrimage, as was pointed out by 11 participants. In addition, the Arba'een walk forms a kind of unity among different religions and nationalities:

The Arba'een pilgrimage is very beautiful and has many cultural effects. For instance, we learn that there is no difference among religions and nationalities; we all have the same goal,

which is the pilgrimage of Imam Hussein (pbuh) (Participant 11).

Strengthening the cultural norms and beliefs of the Iraqi people as a result of interacting with different cultures and being the main organisers of this ritual event is another outcome of the Arba'een walk:

Muharram is, in fact, a renewal of allegiance and the spirit of faith for all Muslims, and it protects the religion. So, strengthening the beliefs of Muslims at a higher level is certainly one of the consequences of this collective pilgrimage (Participant 15).

Political Impacts

The political impacts of the Arba'een walk can be divided into three subthemes (Table 5) including global political effects, political effects on the Muslim world, and effects on Iraq. Improving political relations between countries,

Table 5: The Organising Theme and Subthemes for Political Impacts

Core Theme	Organising Theme	Subthemes (Level I)	Subthemes (Level II)
The Impacts of the Arba'een walk	Political Impacts	Global Impacts	Improving the relations between countries
			Widespread media coverage
			Getting to know Ashura and Imam Hussein (pbuh)
		Impacts on the Islamic community	Muslim assembly from different countries
			Strengthening the relations between Muslim countries
			Creating unity in the Muslim world
			Celebrating the voice of the Muslim world
			Strengthening relations among Shiites
			Strengthening Iran-Iraq relations
		Impacts on Iraq	Creating political solidarity inside Iraq
			Free promotion for the Iraqi government

wide media coverage, and getting the whole world to know the Ashura event and Imam Hussein (pbuh) are outcome of this walk.

In addition, since the Arba'een walk is attended by a large number of Muslims, it can improve relations between Muslim countries, create unity in the Muslim world, and, more importantly, strengthen the relations among Shiites. In this regard, one of the interviewees described the Arba'een event as

the pride of Islam and the voice of Islam
(Participant 5).

Another issue that was frequently highlighted by the interviewees was the improvement of Iran-Iraq ties through the Arba'een walk:

Imam Hussein (pbuh) has brought us together and improved the relations between Iran and Iraq (Participant 21).

For Iraq, the Arba'een march is accompanied by positive political effects, such as greater internal solidarity and free promotion for the Iraqi government.

Impacts on Pilgrims

The last category of the effects of the Arba'een pilgrimage from the viewpoint of the host community includes the effects on the pilgrims themselves (Table 6). Physical impacts, spiritual and psychological reinforcement, deepening of beliefs, familiarity with the customs of the Iraqi people, familiarity with the cities and villages of Iraq, and the rewards of the Hereafter were the points that the Iraqi participants of this study identified as the key positive effects of the Arba'een pilgrimage. Some participants pointed to negative physical effects as well, such as fatigue and illnesses. The judgement often made

was that these trips are not only beneficial to health but also bring both physical and mental vitality to the walking pilgrims:

Arba'een pilgrimage heals the body, polishes the soul, and increases faith (Participant 5).

In addition, since pilgrimage is a spiritual matter, the Arba'een walk certainly has significant psychological impacts which reinforce one's faith. In other words, being in a spiritual place and interacting with other Muslims is accompanied by raised awareness of the religion and deepened beliefs. Besides, as mentioned earlier, this type of travel is considered by Muslims to have significant rewards in the Hereafter.

Familiarity with the customs, cities and villages of Iraq through close interactions with the Iraqi people is another obvious benefit of this walk.

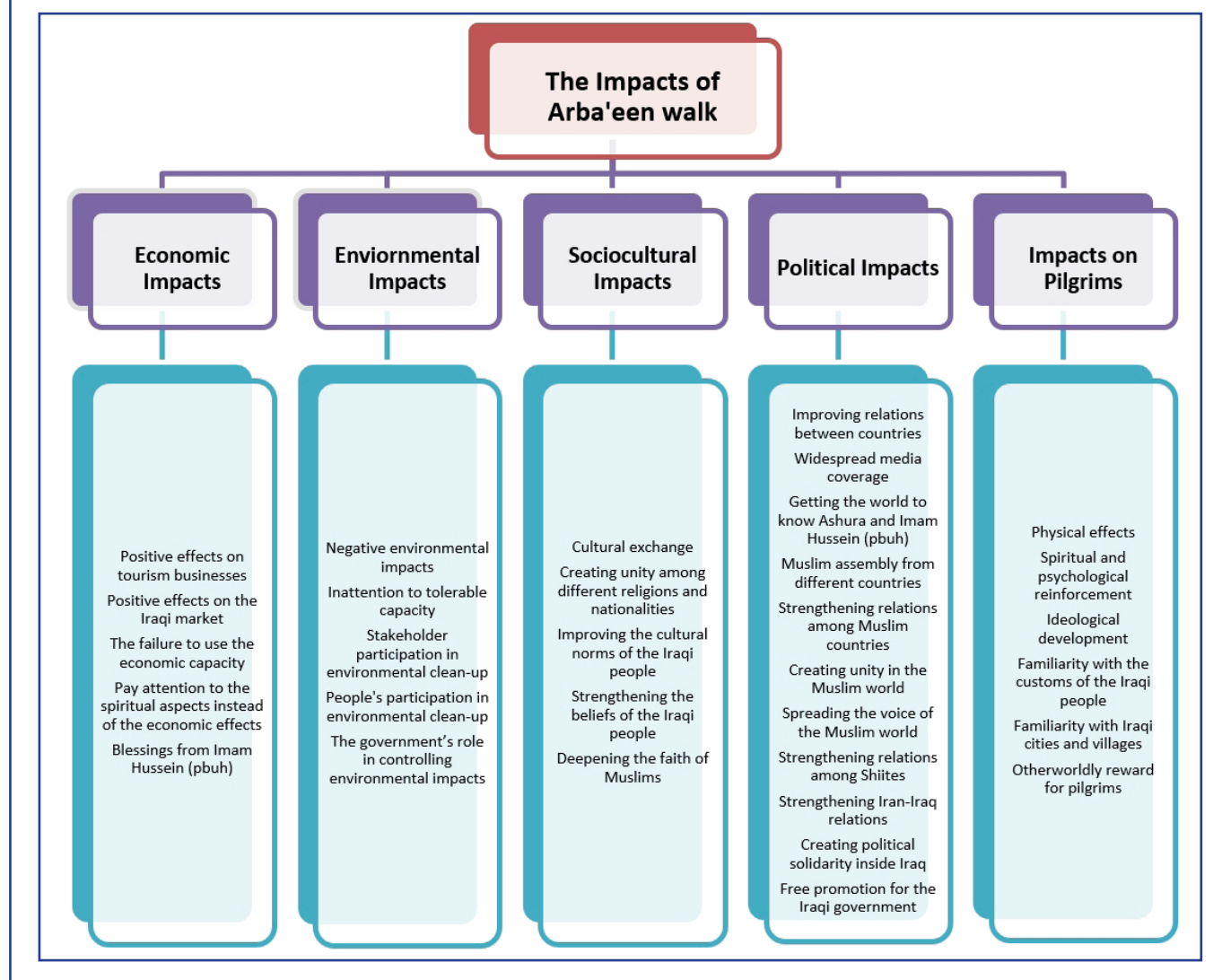
Figure 2 illustrates the overall thematic network of Arba'een impacts from the perspective of the host community

Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research

Studying the impacts of travelling is a main concern for planners and policymakers in the tourism industry. So far, numerous studies have been conducted in this regard. An interesting topic dealt with in these studies is trips involving large numbers of people with spiritual motives. One such trip is the Arba'een procession in which a vast number of travellers walk in pilgrimage to the city of Karbala, Iraq. The present study was carried out to identify the impacts of the Arba'een event from the perspective of the Iraqi people, as the host community. The study on this topic is important in two respects. Firstly, it fills the

Table 6: The Organising Theme and Subthemes for the Impacts on Pilgrims

Core Theme	Organising Theme	Subthemes
The Impacts of the Arba'een walk	Impacts on Pilgrims	Physical health
		Spiritual and psychological reinforcement
		Deepening of religious beliefs
		Familiarity with the customs of the Iraqi people
		Familiarity with Iraqi cities and villages
		Otherworldly rewards for pilgrims

Figure 2: Thematic Network of Arba'een Impacts From the Perspective of the Host Community

existing research gap regarding the opinions of the host community about the Arba'een phenomenon. Secondly, it explores the practical role of the host community in the management and maintenance of this mega-event. Since the Arba'een gathering is based on the cultural values of the host community, the sustainability of this phenomenon also depends on the perceptions and attitudes of the host community toward it.

The findings of this research are valuable from both theoretical and practical points of view. It was shown that the Arba'een walk produces impacts in economic, environmental, socio-cultural, political and personal domains. This finding is similar to that of some previous studies on the Arba'een event. Considering those five domains as the organising themes, there are certain subthemes detected to provide a more vivid picture of the Arba'een walk.

Using the insights from this study, the following actions / suggestions are proposed for the better conduction of the Arba'een event:

- Encouraging pilgrims to buy from the host community would improve the country's economy
- Encouraging pilgrims to comply with health and environment protection guidelines
- Mandating the Iraqi government to plan and minimise the negative environmental effects and to keep the environment clean
- Active participation of the local people in cleaning the neighbourhoods and observing health protocols
- Planning to maximise on the cultural learnings between countries to sustain world peace
- Helping neighbouring countries to effectively plan, manage and serve Arba'een pilgrims

- Using advertisements to introduce the true and peaceful face of Islam and explain the prominent behavioural and moral dimensions of Imam Hussein (pbuh) through media coverage of the Arba'een event
- Using the Arba'een walk to enhance human dignity and moralities based on the eminent role of Imam Hussein (pbuh)
- Complying with health protocols to control the diseases that may affect pilgrims and the Iraqi people
- Providing education to pilgrims and Iraqi people about the culture, customs, and sensitivities of other parties, to make the most of this outstanding opportunity for better human and cultural relations among different nations and religions.

It is to be noted that the data of the study were collected before the global spread of COVID-19. Therefore, future researchers are recommended to re-examine the effects of the Arba'een walk and probe the changes that the crisis has caused for the Arba'een pilgrimage.

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